

## Review essay: Possibilities of Positive Social Action in the Middle East - A Re-Reading of the History of Social Policy in the Region

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Postprint / Postprint

Rezension / review

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jawad, R. (2008). Review essay: Possibilities of Positive Social Action in the Middle East - A Re-Reading of the History of Social Policy in the Region. *Global Social Policy*, 8(2), 267-280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018108090641>

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# *Possibilities of Positive Social Action in the Middle East*

A Re-Reading of the History of Social Policy  
in the Region

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JANINE A. CLARK, *Islam, Charity and Activism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 256 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-2532-1626-7.

RIADEL EL GHONEMY, *Affluence and Poverty in the Middle East*. London: Routledge, 1998. 324 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-4151-0033-6.

CLEMENT HENRY AND ROBERT SPRINGBORG, *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 280 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-5216-2312-4.

STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN (ed.), *Islam and Social Policy*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004. 218 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8265-1447-9.

MASSOUD KARSHENAS AND VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM (eds), *Social Policy in the Middle East: Economic, Political and Gender Dynamics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006. 288 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-4165-7.

SHAHRA RAZAVI AND SHIREEN HASSIM (eds), *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006. 355 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-9630-5.

MAHMOUD SADRI AND AHMED SADRI (eds), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam, Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 256 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-1951-5820-5.

BEHDAD SOHRAB AND FARHAD NOMANI, *Islam and the Everyday World*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. 240 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-4153-6823-0.

QUINTAN WIKTOROWICZ (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 320 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-2532-1621-2.

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## Introduction

... social policy is the academic setting where big processes and powers, grand concepts and theories come together with the constitution and lived experience of personal lives. (Clarke, 2004: 147)

Social policy has a distinctive capacity to offer a new and insightful narrative about the political dynamics of the Middle East, and indeed to highlight the possibilities of positive social action that have so far remained under-represented in the mainstream social policy and development studies literatures. Broadly speaking, social policy is concerned with the protection or promotion of human well-being. But, while there is common consensus both in academia and policy circles that the main goal of social policy are general social welfare, the debate, and indeed, the history of social policy is much more about how social welfare is defined, achieved and measured. This is an important lesson when we consider social policy in the context of the Middle East.

For clarification, the geography of the Middle East in this essay includes countries in the Middle East and North Africa, which according to Henry and Springborg (*Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*, p. 8) extends 'from Morocco to Turkey along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean and as far east as Iran and south to Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen'. The region has a population of half a billion, which is Muslim in the majority, but as the seat of the world's three largest monotheistic religions, it continues to have substantial Christian and Jewish populations.

The books reviewed here consist more or less of the entire collection of recent English-language book publications dealing with social policy in the Middle East. Though modest in number, they cover a broad range of angles on the subject, which point to the dynamic nature of the actors and issues involved.

This essay takes up the story of social policy in the Middle East where the books reviewed have left off. To this end, it represents a revised history of social policy in the region that will present arguments drawn from a variety of new developments in the social policy literature, namely: cultural studies and the dynamics of the policy process, the resurgence of civil society and the voluntary sector in light of the challenges posed by neoliberalism to participative democracy, new currents of thinking in social care that emphasize informality and personalization, old histories of social welfare based on accounts of religious and voluntary welfare organizations that stress the moral purpose of social policy, new lessons that can be learnt from the great strides in social development achieved by East and South East Asian states as diverse as Singapore, North Korea and the Indian state of Kerala.

Based on this discursive background, the essay will argue that there is still room for manoeuvre in the Middle Eastern context starting from the simple premise that social policy in the region can build upon the positive social

action that already exists there. Linked to this simple premise is a more controversial one: religious welfare organizations, particularly Islamic ones (because they are the most widespread and active in the region), are doing important social welfare work in the region. It should be noted that while not all of these organizations are political in the work they do, many are acting as a political voice not only for disenfranchised populations but also for the middle classes.

It is apt to make clear from the start that discussion of religious welfare in this essay is driven neither by ideology nor by nostalgia for a pre-colonial past. Rather, it is based on an earnest enquiry into the realities of social action in the Middle East. Indeed, there is a well-established vein of argument in the development studies literature that advocates local solutions to local problems (Hall and Midgley, 2004) and it is this principle that informs part of the rationale here.

This essay will be made up of two argumentatively opposing sections. The first will highlight the key insights about Middle Eastern social policy that the books reviewed offer. The second section will supplement and in some senses challenge section one by offering a revised reading of both the theoretical conception of social policy that emerges from the books and the analytical approach that is used in them to discuss social policy in the region.

### *Key Insights From the Review Books: The Political Economy of Social Policy and the Failure of Middle Eastern Welfare States*

The books reviewed here offer a broad perspective on the history, and present dynamics of Middle Eastern social policy. They encompass: the political economy of social policy in country case studies (*Social Policy in the Middle East; Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*); theological and philosophical discussion of human well-being in Islam (*Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam, Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush; Islam and Social Policy*); the politics and history of wealth inequalities in the region (El-Ghonemy, 1998; *Globalization and the Politics of Development in the Middle East*); Islamic political movements which provide social welfare services (Clarke, 2004; *Islamic Activism*); the application of Islamic principles to some policy sectors, including health, finance and human rights (*Islam and the Everyday World; Islam and Social Policy*); and finally, the gender dimension of social policy in the region (*Social Policy in the Middle East*; and chapter on Iran by V. Moghadam in *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context*).

The main general comment about the books to mention here is that they primarily describe policies that have failed or which have been successful. Analytically, some of them offer suggestions about what the way forward might be for social policy in the region, but none of them offers a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between the different social forces shap-

ing social policy in the region (state, market, voluntary or informal sector – including the family) or a systematic study of the basis of possible future social action.

This section briefly highlights the main themes that emerge from each of these texts. Based on this, it will offer an assessment of the gaps that remain in the discussion of social policy in the region, and what may be a fruitful way forward for the development of social policy as a subject of research and practical application.

#### INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

Social policy in the Middle East has been most influenced by international intervention, for example, opening up to the European-dominated economy since the 17th century through colonization and mandate rule, which set particular political and economic structures in motion; and since the 1980s, economic reform under the pressure of globalization and structural adjustment programmes led mainly by international development agencies such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. In all these instances, the groups that have taken control for state social policy have been mainly local elites made up of tribal, religious or ethnic leaders and wealthy merchants whose privileged status during mandate rule and afterwards marginalized the interest of a primarily rural agricultural population. The increasing market-orientation of Middle Eastern economies and the privatization programmes they underwent under the present influence of globalization and international development actors has further retrenched the role of the state as principle provider of social services and employer in the public sector.

#### A 'STATIST' POLITICAL-ECONOMIC APPROACH TO SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy is primarily a job for the state. Moghadam and Karshenas et al. (*Social Policy in the Middle East*), El-Ghonemy (1998), Henry and Springborg (2003) and Clark (*Islam, Charity and Activism*) all describe how the states in Middle Eastern countries have failed or are failing to develop effective democratic institutions that can ensure representative government and political participation for all citizens. Whether over-sized and coercive (such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia) or weak and dysfunctional (such as Sudan and Lebanon), states are rife with corruption and the embezzlement of public funds. State social provisioning is especially hard hit because of several factors such as: (1) the misallocation of resources and the prioritization of military spending over key social sectors such as health and education; (2) the narrow economic focus of public policy, which hinges social progress on economic prosperity; (3) the dominance of minority factions in Middle Eastern countries dating back to the colonial era; (4) political insecurity and military conflict, with the protraction of the Arab–Israeli conflict; (5) high levels of state indebtedness, which have taken away funds from social welfare services; (6) the introduction of structural adjustment programmes and the increasing privatization programmes, which have reduced the role of the state further as provider of social services and public sector jobs.

The resulting social ills of unemployment, wealth polarization, and even undernourishment need to be addressed through the reform of public policy and state legislation, in the areas of labour laws for example.

#### CLASSIFICATION OF SOCIAL POLICY: RENTIER, RESIDUAL, NEO-PATRIMONIAL

State social policy is residual in character and is primarily focused on the provision of social safety nets and the reintegration of marginalized groups into society. The most comprehensive employment-based insurance goes to urban public sector workers, particularly those who are unionized, with the best protection going to the army and security forces. At the heart of this residual social policy are key conceptual blockages, namely the overly economic focus of public policy and a corresponding lack of importance accorded to the social. A significant example of this residual or piecemeal approach to social policy is highlighted by the Egypt case study in Karshenas and Moghadam (*Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context*) where since the 1990s, the state has not been able to cut back on key consumer subsidies, as it has wished, due to the outbreak of violent public protest.

Related to this is the characterization of Middle Eastern states as 'Rentier' meaning that their primary source of revenue is from natural resources such as oil and natural gas. This is particularly the case for the oil-rich countries in the Gulf, as well as Iran, Iraq and Algeria. The over-reliance on oil revenues has meant that some states were able to provide social welfare and social insurance services to citizens during the oil boom era of the 1960s–1980s without having to tax citizens on the basis of their civic membership of the nation. The easy access to capital and the sudden overnight affluence brought about by the oil windfall in the region is depicted as a curse by El-Ghonemy (1998) since it has directly undermined the structures of social citizenship and the need to develop the productive capacity of the local population, due to the over-reliance on foreign labour.

The third classification is of social policy as neo-patrimonial due to the persistence of gender discrimination. Islamic family planning laws, female illiteracy and labour legislation impede women from free participation in the labour market and from equal political rights to men. The persistence of the family as a key social unit in society and the main locus of social care also impinges upon gender equality.

#### THE POLITICIZATION OF SOCIAL POLICY: CLIENTELISM AND POLITICAL LEGITIMIZATION OF RULING ELITES

Another major factor hampering social policy is the politicization of welfare and the instrumental use of social policy by the state to gain power and political legitimacy. Some authors argue that this is a historical factor as well, for example the introduction of social benefits to workers and employment guarantees to university graduates in Iran and Egypt in the 1950s/1960s were

motivated by the need to win the support of the working classes in the post-colonial states, and were not based on a civic discourse of social citizenship. Today, social benefits are channelled through clientelist networks, which link ruling governments to their supporters. Thus, social policy today in the Middle East lacks a sense of its own legitimacy.

#### SOCIAL POLICY AS WEALTH REDISTRIBUTION AND THE PROVISION OF BASIC NEEDS

The major challenges that the authors describe for social welfare provisioning are less about the long-term structures of democratic participation and a share in decision-making by society, and more about the urgent measures of wealth redistribution, income transfers, provision of basic needs and ensuring the basic support systems of survival. When measures of human well-being are discussed in some of the books, it is in the developmental/survival terms of child morality, female literacy, sanitation and housing. At the heart of social policy, then, are key challenges of basic economic and social development. This gives the desired purpose and definition of social policy by the authors a particular focus on economic productivity, inherent in female labour participation, creating more employment opportunities, reducing indebtedness, reforming property rights and the Islamic laws that dominate inheritance and family planning.

This is not to say that social policies in the past did not bring about improvements in society in the Middle East. The authors argue that the immediate post-independence era in the 1940s and subsequently the oil-boom era, which lasted until the 1980s, saw rapid social transformation of the region with enormous improvements in education and health, as well as rapid urban transformation. But these gains were rapidly lost, as states became more authoritarian in character and failed to develop adequate economic policies.

#### BREAKDOWN OF STATE/SOCIETY RELATIONS

State and society in the Middle East are 'detached' from each other, indeed, relations between the two reach competition or violent hostility. The sense of social unrest is exacerbated further by the common notion within society that the state should take more responsibility for the welfare of citizens and that the latter have the rights and entitlement over the state to be provided with social services. A main area of contention is basic consumer subsidies, particularly food, where the local population has mounted riots to protest against their withdrawal, for example in Egypt.

Competition between state and societal groups over the public sphere is most acutely expressed in the rise of Islamic groups in the Middle East, with are providing vital public and social services, and thus challenging the state not only as a provider of welfare but as a modern secular institution of government. Some of these groups are well-known political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt) and Hamas (Palestinian Territories) but others are more local and less political, such as the Islah Charitable Society in Yemen or the Mustafa Mahmood Health Clinic in Egypt (*Islam, Charity and Activism*).

Otherwise, the general impression arising from the books is that poor populations have not organized politically around the issues that affect them. Save for a few examples, such as the establishment of rotating funds among poor populations in Egypt, the poor just get on with trying to survive by finding ways, quite often illegal, to access vital public services. The only successful mobilizing force for the poor (and disgruntled middle classes) appears to be Islam.

#### ISLAM AND SOCIAL POLICY

All the authors recognize the influence of Islam on social policy. Islam (like Judaism and Christianity) is described as an important cultural influence on inheritance laws as well as family planning. In this sense, Islam is considered to perpetuate wealth and gender inequalities, although the authors differ in that some argue that women do have rights to property and to work or do have a say in family planning.

Islam is also discussed in terms of its welfare institutions such as *waqf* (religious endowments) and *zakat* (an obligatory 2.5% tax levied on assets). These are also considered at a practical level in the countries that apply them. In all cases, the authors acknowledge that *zakat* had acted as a hugely important source of poverty-alleviation for the poor and that *waqf* played a key role in the socio-economic development of the Middle East in the last few centuries prior to colonization. Some authors examine the application of Islamic principles in particular public policy areas such as health, finance and economy and human rights legislation. Here, it is argued that Islamic economics remains underdeveloped but in the health sector for example, some countries such as Iran have been able to make substantial improvements to primary care thanks to the influence of Islamic principles in Iran after the revolution.

Islamic values are also important as an activating force for social groups and movements in society to engage in public and social service provisioning – as mentioned above. In Egypt, Yemen and Jordan for example, Islamic movements or Islamic charity organizations use social welfare to challenge the basis of the secular modern state, and/or to protect the political status of the professional classes through the provision of employment opportunities and social networks. In the case of political Islamic groups, contributions in the book edited by Wiktorowicz (*Islamic Activism*) depict organizations such as Hamas in Palestine as social movements that have developed locally and are now supported by a comprehensive institutional basis of which the provision of social welfare and public services is a vital component. In these cases, Islam is depicted as the only remaining platform for political contestation and struggle for social justice in the Middle East.

#### SYNTHESIS: THE WELFARE STATE AS A PARTICULAR CULTURAL SETTLEMENT?

The earlier discussion suggests that where social policy and the Middle Eastern state are discussed, the books reviewed confirm an account that we might perhaps have expected of the region. In the book by Karshenas and



Moghadam, the main recommendation put forward is for the state to develop democratic, developmental and socially inclusive policies. El-Ghonemy (1998) also emphasizes the resolution of political and armed conflicts in the region. There is a strong plea for Middle Eastern states to acknowledge the centrality of social analysis in public policy and for the need to devise a new social vision for their societies. But the authors do not explain where we are to start. Instead, they end with an offer of the conventional wisdom of socially inclusive democracy and development.

The author of the Egypt case study in *Social Policy in the Middle East* argues that it was the particular combination of conditions present in Western Europe (inherited socialist values, liberal democratic structures, capitalist accumulation) that made possible the social settlement between labour and the state. This is the ideal of social democracy.

But I argue here what does this say about the possibilities of social action in other contexts? Is there an implicit suggestion that there is an inherently cultural quality to the welfare state or to social policy solutions more broadly? Surely, these questions would undermine the prescribed conventional wisdom of socially inclusive democracy plus development equals social policy?

### *Societal Action and the Ethics of Welfare: Re-reading the History of Social Policy in the Middle East*

This essay will now take an argumentative turn in order to supplement, and in some cases challenge the account of social policy in the Middle East that we find in the books reviewed. To this end, this section will explore the implications of four key themes.

First, I consider a more populist version of social welfare, inspired by the development studies literature and historical accounts of citizenship in the region; second, I address the limits of political economy and the potential of culture for analysing social policy; third, I consider the new trend in the literature on the voluntary sector and civil society that is gaining ground in Western Europe as a way to revive participative democracy; finally, I conclude with the question of religious welfare and faith-based organizations that have re-emerged with force in American and British social policy. This leads to my final redefinition of social policy as a fundamentally ethical endeavour centred upon what it means to be human.

#### POPULIST/SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS ONE POSSIBILITY OF POSITIVE SOCIAL ACTION

In the Western social policy literature, populism has acquired a bad reputation for its association with conservatism and traditionalism, which can incite exclusionary or anti-immigrant sentiment (Hall and Midgely, 2004). However, populism may help us better understand the dynamic of social

policy in the Middle East, not just during and after the colonial era but also with respect to the current involvement of Islamic social movements in social welfare in the region. Indeed, Hall and Midgely (2004) argue that populist approaches to social change have had a long history and a substantial record of achievements in the developing countries of the South. The works of Paolo Freire in Brazil, popular social movements in India and Latin America, and the expansion of social services in Argentina under President Juan Peron in the 1960s were all inspired by forms of populism that had the strength to attract the 'people' around a sense of common identity (Hall and Midgely, 2004). Indeed, recent recognition of the success of social policy in the 'tiger' economies of East Asia acknowledges the influence of traditional Confucian values and the objectives of nation-building and political legitimization that have underpinned them (Walker and Wong, 2005).

The discussion of populism here is not based on nostalgia for an Islamic society or on a romantic vision of local people. Rather, it is based on the simple premise of what is happening on the ground to people's ordinary lives in the Middle East and where effective social action is taking place.

Taking a historical look, Thompson (2001) documents how during mandate rule in Lebanon and Syria, populist movements flourished particularly in 1942–3. Along with the women's movement, which was very active at the time, and the communist movement, populist movements played an active role in challenging the authorities of the mandate, and in defining the terms of their subsequent citizenship by demanding the establishment of key political and social rights. Thompson (2001) denotes these movements as 'subaltern' because they were in conflict with the colonial rulers and the local elites whose alliances with colonial rulers protected their privilege and powers. It was through the combined efforts of these movements that the semblance of a welfare state based on citizenship rights was established in Lebanon and Syria in the post-independence era.

In the contemporary context, Jaber (1997), Shadid (2001) and Wiktorowicz (*Islamic Activism*) argue that Islamic groups such as Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, the Virtue Party in Turkey (previously Refah), the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hizbullah in Lebanon have taken their social welfare role very seriously and are offering a real social agenda for large populations in their countries, many of whom come from the poor segments of society. While some of these organizations appear notorious, they pose serious questions about the future of social policy in the region and more significantly, the enduring role of religious welfare organizations, with Islamic organizations at their helm.

To this extent, Shadid (2001) argues that such organizations have a real sense of social obligation and are not driven primarily by political motives of self-interest. They see their social welfare work as an expression of their solidarity with deprived members of their population. To this end, Shadid (2001) advocates formal political support of these organizations, based on a culturally-sensitive analysis that places Islam at the heart of social policy in the region.

## CULTURE AND SOCIAL POLICY

Clarke (2004) makes an insightful argument about the connection between culture and social policy: the understanding of what is happening to the welfare state has to start with how we think about it. According to Clarke (2004), culture means the 'politics of articulation', or put in a simpler way, it is the study of how social actors interact and enter into conflict with each other in order to define or indeed control the environment they live in. This can bring important insights to how social policy works, particularly as policy making itself is a complex process and has as much to do with the actors involved in making the decisions as with its actual content (Hudson, 2007). In this sense, Clarke (2004: 154) describes the welfare state as a combination of 'institutionalised formations (apparatuses, policies, practices) and political-cultural imaginaries (symbolizing unities, solidarities and exclusions)'.

Based on this analysis, Clarke (2004) arrives at the conclusion that in Britain, for example, what we are witnessing in fact is not the end of welfare but simply a process of destabilization and change whereby a new national welfare settlement will eventually emerge. For, from a cultural perspective, at the heart of the conflict over welfare and its meaning is the definition of nationhood and the construction of the 'people' in a nation as citizens.

Thus, while the political-economic analysis of social policy in the Middle East that is presented in the review books can help us understand how states have succeeded or failed to redistribute wealth in their countries, it misses the way in which the social order was itself negotiated and how states were also exercising influence on the national formations and symbols of identity among their populations. Indeed, a cultural analysis would suggest that political conflict over welfare and its association to nation-building in the Middle East is part and parcel of the nature of social policy, since a social settlement is a particular negotiation arrived at by various conflicting groups.

To this end, Thompson's (2001) study of Lebanon and Syria in the 1940s is instructive as she argues that the movements struggling for state recognition and welfare services (women's, communist and populist/religious movements) did so by using the same terms of reference of the colonial ruler against whom they were struggling.

To summarize, then, what does this mean for our reading of social policy in the Middle East? The history of the welfare state cannot be understood in a linear form that imposes a rational and objectivist approach to the study of social policy. Instead, as Clarke argues (2004: 5), our reading of history needs to be 'conjunctural', in that it should be sensitive to the variety of forces that come into play in order to produce a particular event or definition of a concept. For our present purpose, this would mean supplementing the historical account of social policy from the point of view of the state, which is portrayed in the books reviewed through an analysis of the multiplicity of social actors and the polysemy of the concept of welfare itself. This is based on recognizing social policy as a discourse and as an anthropological phenomenon.

The gender dimension of this kind of analysis has been well demonstrated by Thompson's (2001) historical analysis of the social movements that flourished in the 1940s in Lebanon and Syria. Thompson (2001) argues that the civic order that was established was not equitable in part because of the threat to paternal privilege that was perceived at the time which women eventually gave in to, thereby giving more weight to the pull between social/political rights for colonized people and the paternal/class privilege of the ruling elites. This shaped the final course of citizenship. This confirms Clarke's (2004) argument that social categories such as race, gender and class are not mutually exclusive but intermingle and constitute each other to form a larger formation of the nation.

Society in the Middle East, then, may not be as passive as our authors depict. For the significance of the politics of articulation suggests that power struggles do not end in subjection and dominance but in accommodation and negotiation. This offers the possibility of finding new solutions to the status quo.

#### THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW WELFARE ETHIC

There is a new generation of thinking in the social policy literature which is actively addressing the challenge of exploring how social policy and human well-being might look like beyond the strict borders of the welfare state – at least in the western context. This literature comes under many names: the mixed economy of welfare or welfare pluralism (Powell, M., 2007), the voluntary sector (Milligan and Conradson, 2006), the third sector or third way (Powell, M., 2007), civil society (Powell, M., 2007), social capital (Milligan and Conradson, 2006). Recalling Gøsta Esping-Andersen's statement that social policy, welfare states and welfare regimes are not the same, M. Powell (2007: 6) notes: 'social policy can exist without welfare states ... social policy predates welfare states'.

The key argument here is that the state, market and voluntary/informal sector have always combined in different ways to deliver, finance and devise social services (Powell, M., 2007). Thus, it is not so much the role of non-state actors that has increased in the western context but their visibility to social policy thinkers and makers in recent times. This visibility has been brought about by the changing fortunes of the 'classic welfare state', which has come under fiscal and political pressure from the advancement of the neoliberal agenda and the subsequent demise of the traditional nation-state, inherent in the need to accommodate the rise of new interest groups.

Discussion of the apparent virtues of the voluntary sector has been split between the left and right. Conservatives, who discourage state involvement in social welfare anyway on both moral and fiscal grounds favour the reinstitution of old mutuals that were destroyed by the welfare state (Powell, M., 2007). On the left, the concern is more about preserving the quality of participative democracy and social citizenship in light of the argument that only the state

can guarantee equality. This has served to focus attention on the meaning of 'the social' in order to maintain the basic principles of social welfare. It is noteworthy, that Karshenas and Moghadam (*Social Policy in the Middle East*) argue for the need to make social analysis more central in public policy and to not just focus on political economy, yet no clear definition of the social is presented. Clarke (2004) and F. Powell (2007) also discuss the meaning of the social in a challenging way that can shed light on the situation of the Middle East.

Clarke (2004) argues that while the social continues to be the site of contestation between various actors in society over social inequalities, it has now acquired a new dynamic thanks to the neoliberal agenda. In this sense, the 'social' has become depoliticized and largely driven by economic concerns, as inherent in New Labour's welfare to work ethos. On the other hand, F. Powell (2007) argues that the inability of the welfare state to accommodate new welfare constituencies has made the notion of the social defunct and what matters more is 'active' citizenship as opposed to social citizenship.

These concerns reflect a deep debate in the western social policy context about the nature of participative democracy and an apparent crisis of associational culture brought on by the individualism of neoliberalism. F. Powell (2007) argues for the development of civic virtue through the flourishing of civil society institutions. This also echoes New Labour's concern to deal with welfare reform and to develop social capital (Powell, F., 2007). With reference to faith-based organizations, F. Powell (2007) cites Habermas who argues that democracy does not have inherent within it all the ingredients to allow its effective functioning and that Europe needs to reconcile with its religious heritage.

Added to this is an increasing concern with human dignity in social welfare (Chan and Bowpitt, 2005), and mounting questions about the impact of professionalization and institutionalization on social care (Banks, 2004).

#### THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS WELFARE AND THE MORAL NATURE OF SOCIAL POLICY

I would argue, then, that there appears to be a crisis in the ethic of welfare in western social policy, which is characterized by a search for the underlying moral values that can support social solidarity. Debates about the crisis of democracy in the face of neoliberalism, the rise of the voluntary sector and the concern to find a new moral glue for postmodern society suggest that the capacities of the local social movements in the Middle East that are offering social services need to be supported. Indeed, at the heart of social policy is a concern with the moral content of social life.

This concern is highlighted by the debate on the ethics of care in the western theoretical literature (Banks, 2004). The welfare ethics of religious organizations in the Middle East are fundamentally based on caring, which are built on relationships of personal trust. Banks (2004) argues that these qualities are being undermined in the modern context of social care in the UK.

Religious identity, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish, is an intrinsic part of the history and identity of the Middle East's populations. The civilizational

and developmental legacy of religion on these societies is long and well established. It is also attested to by some of our review authors (such as El-Ghonemy, 1998; Heyneman, 2004). Both these authors, as well as Clark (*Islam, Charity and Activism*) and Thompson (2001) cite, for example, the role of the Islamic welfare institution of *waqf* (religious endowments) in promoting the social, political and economic development of the region especially during the Ottoman empire.

Thus, there is a rational basis and indeed an urgent need to pose seriously the question of religious welfare in social policy in the Middle East. It is in recognition of this that the classification of social policy as residual or 'Rentier' in the Middle East loses ground. But religious welfare is not only relevant to the Middle East. Much of the anxiety in western social policy also rests in the problematic resurgence of faith-based welfare in the USA and the UK. One of the more controversial developments in this regard is the establishment in 2000 of the Office of Faith-Based Services in the USA (Milligan and Conradson, 2006).

## Conclusion

This essay has sought to challenge the mainstream thinking about social policy in the Middle East. The analysis presented in the books reviewed centres social policy on the role of the state and its capacity to redistribute wealth and develop the economic capacities of both men and women. But this is a partial analysis of social policy in the region, and it is one that narrows the room for manoeuvre for future social action. I have argued that by changing how we think about the policy process and the nature of social policy, it may still be possible to find new ways of understanding existing problems in the Middle East and therefore, of finding new solutions.

Culture and political economy complement each other to offer a more holistic understanding of human well-being. The new developments in the Western social policy literature about the role of the voluntary sector, the limits to participative democracy, and the need to develop more personalized and ethical understandings of social welfare all highlight the possibilities of positive social action within the voluntary sector in the Middle East. After all, religious and secular understandings of social justice share a common heritage in this region.

Based on the simple precept that religious welfare organizations in the Middle East are acting out of social solidarity to solve social problems, allowing them formal recognition into the social policy apparatus may form a step in the right direction.

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